

House Republican Press Release

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Rep. Hetherington Opposes Food Mandate On Local School Districts



Legislation approved by the state House of Representatives to tell school districts what food and drinks to sell to Connecticut's 600,000 public school students and adding at least 20 minutes per day for recess is another mandate that erodes the local control of school districts, said state Representative John W. Hetherington, R-125th District, New Canaan, Wilton.

The measure (Senate Bill 1309) would prohibit the sale of candy, sodas, and other snacks from school vending machines and require schools to set aside 20 minutes per school day for recess, said Rep. Hetherington, who voted to oppose the bill. It passed 88-55, after eight hours of debate.

Rep. Hetherington said, "I strongly believe that these decisions should be made by our elected boards of education. These local boards include parents and community leaders who are better qualified than faceless bureaucrats to determine what is best for our children. Moreover, I am especially disappointed that my amendment was not adopted. This amendment would have protected school boards and their members from civil liability for adverse health consequences should some banned beverages or snacks be sold in school by accident."

"Once again, the state legislative majority is dictating another mandate on school districts throughout Connecticut," Rep. Hetherington said. "They are setting food and recess policy without public hearings from parents or educators who are most familiar with the needs of their towns and are best-qualified to make decisions that have wide-ranging implications for students, teacher and parents. Operating under the assumption that 'Big Brother knows best,' politicians and bureaucrats in Hartford are directing day-to-day operation of our schools more than ever before."

For example, Representative Hetherington said, the legislation allows schools to offer only water, milk, 100% fruit or vegetable juice, and beverages with only water and fruit juice. It allows high schools to sell sugar free soft drinks or Gatorade type drinks ½ hour after lunch ends, provided they make up only 20% of the beverages they offer.

Middle and high schools would be permitted to sell all other beverages, if the sale is in connection with a school-sponsored event after the regular school day or weekend and they are sold at the location of the event and not from a vending machine or school store.

It also requires the State Department of Education to publish a list of recommended prepackaged foods and set nutritional standards for other foods that can be the only foods offered in schools in the state. This list must be published by January 1, 2006. The school districts must implement these recommendations by August 15, 2006.

All schools are permitted to sell foods not on this list at the end of the regular school day or weekend, if this is at a school-sponsored event and the foods are not sold from a vending machine or school store.

This latest amendment allows for any food to be sold as part of fundraising activities.

Representative Hetherington said, "Childhood obesity is a serious one, but this is faulty legislation to address only what happens at school a few hours a week. It will not change what eating behavior off school grounds or at home."

"Decisions on matters as basic as recess and the kinds of food and beverages students should be allowed to consume are better left to local school boards who set priorities based on information they receive from parents, students, teachers and administrators. This unprecedented and unwarranted intrusion into matters that have traditionally been the responsibility of local elected officials is a clear threat to the autonomy of Connecticut's towns and cities," Representative Hetherington said.

The legislation was returned to the State Senate for reconsideration after the House amended it May 18. The Senate approved an earlier version of the bill April 27. Both chambers must agree on a final version, before it can go to Governor M. Jodi Rell to be signed into law.